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RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 1660
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2780
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SUBJECT: Asbestos-Coated Heating Pipes, Construction Materials A
Clear And Present Danger to Ulaanbaatar's Residents?

¶1. Asbestos and cement covered pipes that make up Ulaanbaatar's aged and decaying centralized heating system may constitute a significant unidentified health risk. Of the 286 kilometers of heating pipes that snake through the city, estimates indicate 91% are coated with asbestos-cement insulation. Some 83.2 kilometers of piping are above ground, much of it near residences or workplaces, where it is exposed to the harsh and destructive Mongolian climate and susceptible to more rapid decay.

Asbestos Insulation Also Used in Building Construction

¶2. Some NGO reps note that street children and the homeless, who often camp near underground heating pipes to escape the cold of winter, are particularly vulnerable to increased direct exposure to asbestos particles from exfoliating and crumbling sections of pipe. The public at large is also at risk due to exposure to asbestos-laden building materials and piping insulation. There are currently no special disposal procedures for removal of asbestos-laden building materials and waste is simply deposited in the city's single open pit landfill, Ulaanchuluut, located near several ger communities in the city's northwest quadrant. Replaced heating pipes are often resold as scrap metal with little effort given to sandblast away remnants of the asbestos coating.

GOM Health Experts Down Play Asbestos Risk But...

¶3. While fully cognizant of the dangers presented by exposure to asbestos, many of the health experts post spoke with had never viewed the use of asbestos as insulation for heating pipes as a threat to public health. Some even argued that concentrations of asbestos fiber dust from crumbling pipe sealants are not high enough to represent a serious danger. Ditto for construction materials use and disposal. They admit, however, it can take from 10 to 40 years or more for symptoms of asbestos-related conditions to manifest themselves and Mongolia's underdeveloped health care system lacks the capacity to diagnose these diseases properly. Furthermore, local laboratories do not abide by internationally accepted testing standards, making determinations about the affects of asbestos exposure to the general population difficult to discern. Finally, given the prevalence of asbestos used in constructions, especially in structures build before 1990, it would be hard to determine the real source of any asbestos-related illness.

... Banned Its Use And Are Slowing Replacing Pipes

¶4. The GOM has long been aware of the dangers of asbestos. The use of asbestos cement sheets was commonplace for buildings constructed before the 1990s, when the country was under Soviet domination. Mongolian building codes now prohibit asbestos in new construction and heating pipes extensions for new developments are coated with polyurethane. Damaged sections of pipe are replaced with polyurethane covered piping. However, according the Ministry of Fuels and Energy, less than 10 kilometers of Ulaanbaatar's heating pipe system are asbestos free.

¶5. Because the GOM's expressed desire to replace all exposed asbestos piping with polyurethane coated pipes has been stymied by the high cost, around US\$1 million per kilometer, it has instead sought donor assistance but with middling results. The Asia Development Bank, GTZ, Germany's development assistance organization, and the Korean aid agency, KOIKA, have engaged in limited asbestos removal programs, but usually in connection with broader projects on heating deliverance systems or urban construction.

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